ETHICS IN THE FIRE SERVICE

Do We Need a Written Statement ?

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, the American citizen has watched the evening news report public scandals, corruption and breaches of trust at all levels of government, including the fire service. These well publicized events continue to erode the public's trust and confidence in government. The cynical public has demanded greater accountability and an adherence to higher moral and ethical standards.

The **problem** is that many fire departments, including the Hollywood Fire Rescue Department, did not have a stand alone code of ethics written document to guide the decision making process.

The **purpose** of this applied research project was to gain an understanding of ethical principles that should be in place to guide all of our decisions. Research would provide the justification and direction to develop and implement a code of ethics.

The **descriptive method of research** was used for this study. The following questions were presented for discussion and were answered within the "Results" section of this applied research project:

1.   What is Ethics and what role does it play in the fire service?

2.   Do other fire departments in our department's geographic area have a written code of ethics?

3.   Should a written code of ethics or a value statement be adopted by our department? What are the current trends?

4.   If indicated, how should our department develop and implement a

write   code of ethics?

The **procedure** used was a literary review of all available literature regarding

ethics, values, and morals. A survey instrument was also used to measure

current status of other departments and emerging trends.

The **results** of the literature review and survey were overwhelming. Few

departments had an ethical policy to guide the decision process. A plan to

develop, train, and implement a written code of ethics was needed.

The **recommendations** developed following the compilation of the answers

to the research and survey questions within the results section. An evaluation

of the results and the anticipated implications for the organization were

analyzed within the Discussion section. The recommended action was to

establish a written code of ethics in the Hollywood Fire Rescue Department.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The topic of "Ethics" is not new. The relevance and importance of this topic has not diminished over time. The well publicized scandals in every level of government, including the fire service, further erode the public's trust and confidence. The public is demanding that the leadership in the public sector be held accountable for their actions. They expect leaders to have high ethical and moral standards.

There is a great deal of complexity to the problem of ethics. Since employees perceive issues in different ways, it is difficult for them to identify a correct ethical behavior or approach to a given situation. The ethical behavior or standards are often based on values and beliefs acquired as a child, altered somewhat by their environmental and cultural exposures.

THE PROBLEM

The problem is that the fire service, as part of the public sector, is coming under intense scrutiny from the citizens we serve. To maintain the public's trust, our decisions and actions must be guided by a common, agreed upon, and understood set of values or ethical principles. The Hollywood Fire Rescue Department does not have a written, stand alone document that provides ethical guidance to its members. As a result, the members must interpret the Department's ethical position by drawing from sections of the standard operating guideline manual, administrative policy and procedure manual, rules & regulations, departmental bulletins, and the labor agreement. This results in many interpretations and uncertainty for a

common direction in ethical behavior.

THE PURPOSE

The purpose of this applied research project was to explore the definition and function of ethics, as well as the application of ethical principles to the decision making process within the Hollywood Fire Rescue Department. The research would also provide justification and direction for the development and implementation of a written code of ethics that would provide a common direction for ethical behavior.

THE METHODOLOGY

The method of research used for this study was the descriptive method and was designed to characterize the value of a proactive position regarding the subject of ethics in the fire service. The following questions were identified that need to be answered as part of this research:

1. What is Ethics and what role does it play in the fire service?

2. Do other fire departments in our department's geographic area have a written code of ethics?

3. Should a written code of ethics or a value statement be adopted by our department? What are the current trends in the fire service?

4. If indicated, how should our department develop and implement a written code of ethics?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The subject of ethics has become a hot topic of discussion in the public sector. Scandals and evidence of unethical behavior in government have resulted in cynicism and distrust of public administrators and the agencies for which they work. The fire service has not escaped the media's hunt for scandals nor has it remained isolated from the citizens' critical view of its actions. The National Fire Academy and the Federal Emergency Management Agency were not immune from allegations of breaches in ethical conduct during 1990 (Thomas, 1990).

Increased attention is focusing on public sector accountability for the decisions made and actions taken in carrying out the mission of serving the public. The fire service officer must become aware of the importance of making the right decision and basing the decision on a standard, principle, policy, or guideline that reflects the ethical position of the department. Many officers are aware of the importance of making decisions that are ethical but are unsure of the direction to take to correctly and consistently resolve ethical dilemmas (Grant & Hoover, 1994).

In the Hollywood Fire Rescue Department, an officer would make a decision involving an ethical dilemma based on the officer's common sense combined with a detailed understanding of the numerous rules, policies, guidelines, bulletins, and procedures. These documents provide direction concerning employee conduct, response protocols, complaint procedures, proper uniform attire, time off provisions, disciplinary action, and other

recommendations. For most of the officers, the extraction of the needed ethical guidelines works most of the time. However, in light of the recent "Headline News" events, most of the time is no longer acceptable. Without a common set of ethical guidelines understood by all, our fire officers do not have clear ethical parameters to utilize for executing ethical decisions or ethical behavior.

This applied research paper is being written for the Executive Leadership course as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. The topic of ethics, ethical behavior, and a written code of ethics were components of Unit # 3, "Developing Self as a Leader" in the Executive Leadership course taught by Dr. Larry Ritcey, Dr. Charles Beitz, and Dr. Oliver Jones.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review was to locate published articles that would provide a better understanding of what "Ethics" is, and why it is important in the fire service decision making process. The review also explored articles that would provide insight and direction regarding the need to have a written code of ethics; and if so, what issues are to be included, and how the document is to be developed and implemented. The literature review included a search and review of fire service, public administration, and business related magazines, journals, and text books.

Grant and Hoover define "Ethics" as "The standards or principles of conduct that govern the behavior of an individual or group of individuals" (Grant and Hoover, 1994, p. 396).

Luthans defines "Ethics" as pertaining to moral issues and dealing with right and wrong behavior. Luthans sums up his discussion by implying that ethical behavior is determined by the broad categories of cultural influences, organizational influences, and the external environment (Luthans, 1995).

Robey makes a distinction between values and ethics. He implies that values show us what is important, but can not be judged right or wrong. Ethics, when institutionalized, do prescribe what is right and wrong (Robey, 1994).

Folisi discusses the differences between ethics and morality. Through original translation, Folisi believes that ethics refers to a person's

individual character traits while morality refers to the relationship with others (Folsi, 1991).

Springer provides a simple definition, "A given system of conduct; principles of morality; rules or standards for human actions or professions" (Springer, 1988, p. 29).

Springer and Stittleburg provide a "need" statement with their article's opening question which asks, "So why, in a world that is increasingly fraught with legal and ethical complexities, do so few fire officers receive training or even basic guidance in handling the potentially dicey decisions they make every day" (Springer & Stittleburg, September 1992, p. 49)?

Compton believes that ethical behaviors revolve around personal and organizational responsibilities. He believes that whenever we accept a leadership position within the fire service that we automatically enter into an ethical contract where we commit ourselves to the internal and external customers, leadership and followship, professional conduct, and personal commitment. He believes that no one is perfect in all categories, but we should strive to get close (Compton, 1996).

The South Florida communities are rich in diversity. "Ethics reflect the prevailing culture of a community and an organization" (Grant & Hoover, 1994, p. 400). Cultural diversity has led to situations that may be acceptable for one group of people and unethical for another group. Grant and Hoover further detail how in several African countries, the practice of providing a judge with a gift prior to the judge rendering a decision is acceptable in that it

is an individual's expression of gratitude in advance to the judge. In this country, it would be unethical and probably illegal (Grant & Hoover, 1994).

Springer & Stittleburg recommend that fire service managers become educated in ethics through self study and enrolling in classes in ethics. They encourage managers to develop both a written code of ethics and a value statement through "a participatory style" by utilizing the internal talents in the organization. The authors state that you should be there to initiate and facilitate the process, but solicit involvement to establish a sense of ownership or buy-in with the employees (Springer & Stittleburg, 1992, p. 55).

Marinucci stresses the importance of having a written code of ethics for all to see and understand. As well as having formal training on ethics, the author also believes that informal discussion of ethical issues should take place as soon as an issue arises. Open discussion of questionable situations provide an excellent starting point for dialogue. A key element is maintaining open communications (Marinucci, 1992).

Steffens believes that the fire service has been slow in adopting the concept of ethical standards. He cites the IAFC and the ICMA as a reference or a base to start from. He states, "We must work to insure that our organization has a clear and written ethical code". This written code will provide our personnel with an understanding of what is and is not acceptable to the organization. Steffens also believes that the chief officers are the role models and set the example for others to follow. It is important for them to practice what they preach (Steffens, 1994, p. 26).

Grant & Hoover state that "the fire service leaders must recognize the need for ethical standards and clearly define the boundaries of ethical conduct with a written code of ethics" (Grant & Hoover, 1994, p. 419).

Schuler discusses the issues of ethical standards as they relate to Human Resource Management. Schuler recommends that detailed policy statements spell out the type of behavior that is ethical and unethical. The author described these documents as policy statements. Again, the recommendation is to have a written document (Schuler, 1996).

Hewitt stresses that fire chiefs must recognize that their behavior sets the moral tone of their department. If the firefighters observe the chief taking short cuts, they can only assume that that is the way things are done around here. Hewitt believes that the restoration of ethical values is the first step in closing the trust gap (Hewitt, 1995).

Coleman discusses the ethics issue and the ultimate integrity test for a fire chief. This is where the chief is asked to do something that is outright illegal; or where the chief is asked to do something within his legal means; but the action is either unethical or immoral by his standards. If the chief decides not to act, he may be fired or forced to resign. The author suggests attempting to reason with the superior but being fully prepared to resign or be fired for failure to act (Coleman, 1995).

LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

In reviewing the literature, a clear impression of ethics was established and how it fits in the (public) fire service. It is also evident that

the fire service leaders agree that a clearly written ethical statement or code

of ethics is a must for the organization. For it to be successful, it has to be

visible, supported by management, reinforced through ongoing training,

updated as necessary, and incorporated into the promotional process.

Involving department members to participate in the development of the ethics

statement will foster ownership and buy in by the members. Implementation

should follow adequate instruction and training for all departmental members.

PROCEDURES

While at the National Fire Academy, the applied research project topic was selected and finalized. The research method selected was the descriptive method. Considerable time was spent in the Learning Resource Center (LRC) in Emmitsburg, Maryland, researching journals, articles, and texts relating to ethics, ethical behavior, morals, values, and code of ethics. The research revealed many sources at the LRC. This permitted multiple viewpoints to be analyzed. The Saint Thomas University Library in Miami was also researched. These writings were reviewed to determine definitions, trends, development, and implementation methods for a code of ethics. The summary of the literature review provided a consensus on the key issues relating to the subject.

SURVEY

Following the review of available literature, a written survey was developed. The survey instrument cover letter (See Appendix A) and the survey instrument (See Appendix B) used was to determine to what extent a written code of ethics existed within the fire rescue departments located in the Southeast region of Florida. The one page instrument consisted of a six part survey that used primarily "Yes", "No", or "NA" responses.

POPULATION

The survey population consisted of a total of 30 different fire rescue departments located within Dade and Broward County. Survey respondents were limited to chief officers. The target departments were limited to Dade and Broward County due to both counties sharing a unique cultural diversity

and all departments providing a similar scope of services.

DATA COLLECTION

Survey questions were sent by fax and also conducted over the telephone during the first week of January, 1998. These methods were chosen in order to ensure a response within a timely fashion. Raw data was tabulated and converted to a percentage based on the number of respondents.

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The research was conducted on the assumption that responses to the survey were truthful and in good faith. The research was limited to fire departments located in Dade and Broward County. This was primarily due to the cultural diversity that exists within both counties and all departments providing a similar scope of services. Three of the thirty surveyed departments failed to respond to the survey request.

RESULTS

The answers to the original research questions were obtained through a literature review of the numerous articles located in the Learning Resource Center, and the St. Thomas University library in Miami, and the feedback from the survey instrument.

ANSWERS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The four original research questions are reviewed and answered:

1.   **What is Ethics and what role does it play in the fire service?**

Ethics was defined as the standards or principles of conduct that govern the behavior of an individual or group of individuals. A given system of conduct, principles of morality, rules, or standards. Ethics refers to a person's individual character traits, while morality refers to the relationship with others. It is also defined as pertaining to moral issues and dealing with right and wrong behavior. Luthans sums up his discussion by implying that ethical behavior is determined by the broad categories of cultural influences, organizational influences, and the external environment. Values show us what is important, but can not be judged right or wrong. Ethics, when institutionalized, do prescribe what is right and wrong. The fire service is a profession holding a great deal of public trust. With this trust comes the citizen expectation that all decisions made involving public safety or the use of public funds will be made using sound judgement and ethical principles. The role of ethics is also that of a benchmark. Fire

executives should be making all decisions using this benchmark as a guide. Adherence to a written standard, over time, will establish itself as a benchmark fostering continued ethical awareness.

2.   **Do other fire departments in our department's geographic area have a written code of ethics?**

Based on the survey instrument results, 7 out of 27 (26%) responding departments (30 surveyed) have a written code of ethics. Further details of the survey are provided in the survey results section as well as in the appendices.

3.   **Should a written code of ethics or a value statement be adopted by our department? What are the current trends in the fire service?**

Based on the literature review and upon the survey results, our Department should adopt a written code of ethics. The survey response to question # 4 indicates that 60% of departments responding that do not have a written code of ethics do not feel that their members share a common understanding of the organization's ethical climate. That in itself should motivate those without a written code of ethics to develop one. All the literature reviewed strongly advised that we adopt a written code of ethics for our Department. The current trends suggest that most departments are becoming acutely aware of the public's scrutiny of how we make decisions and are developing an ethical statement or standard to follow. This

provides some assurances to the public that we are worthy of their continued trust.

4. **If indicated, how should our department develop and implement a written code of ethics?**

The literature suggested that you began with what you already have. Review your Mission statement, policies, procedures, annual reports, etc. to determine the organization's values. This will lead to the development of a value statement. This states what we believe in and what we value highly enough to commit ourself to achieve. Engage in participatory management where members of the department work together on developing a code of ethics from the value statements. This will insure an ownership or buy in to the process and final product. There are also a number of developed code of ethics statements developed for the IAFC, ASPA, ICMA, and others that are easily modified for individual department use.

SURVEY RESULTS

The complete results of the survey instrument may be viewed in the appendices located at the back of this report. The two most glaring results of the survey were to survey questions # 1 and # 4. The results of survey question # 1 indicate that only 7 out of 27 responding departments or 26% have a written code of ethics. A significant finding was the response to survey question # 4 which indicates that 60% of the respondents that do not have a code of ethics do not feel that the members share a common understanding of their ethical climate. If the literary findings fail to motivate one to develop a standard, the results of this survey question should provide the impetus.

DISCUSSION

The literature review indicates that "Ethics" is a hot topic of the '90s. As the public's attitudes toward government and officials of government continues to become less trusting as a result of the well publicized breaches of ethical, moral, and fiduciary trust, we can only expect to have our actions questioned and our spending scrutinized. This should be a wake up call for managers of departments that do not have a feel for the ethical climate in their community. The literature indicates that the trend is for more and more departments to develop ethical standards and value statements out of concern over maintaining the public's trust and respect.

The survey instrument results support and are supported by the literature findings. The literature review and the survey results were not really a surprise to this writer with the exception of Survey question # 4 which was previously explained.

The implications for my organization will be to begin developing a written code of ethics through the participatory management committee formation. It will also be necessary to sternly advise management staff to review their own ethical compass to be sure that it is in congruence with that of the organization. The managers must serve as an example to firefighters. The old "Do as I say, Not as I Do" philosophy has no place in today's organizations.

Following the development phase completion, training needs to be conducted to educate the entire membership with the concepts contained

within the code of ethics prior to the implementation phase. This is a

process that is will actually alter the culture of the organization. For a

successful transition, the implementation must be gradual but deliberate. It is

a learning process for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report began with a need to understand "Ethics" and how it was such a part of the fabric of our organization. The problem was soon identified as an organization not having a commonly understood, agreed upon set of ethical principles to follow in the decision making process to assure the maintenance of the public trust. It is true that the increased frequency of public sector scandals has caused the public to take a closer look at all aspects of the public sector including the fire service community. The purpose of the report was now focused on gaining a thorough understanding ethics, determining the level of commitment to ethics by our neighboring departments through a survey instrument, and finally, preparing a recommendation to develop, train, and implement our own written code of ethics.

The results of the literature review and the survey clearly provide overwhelming support for the establishment of a written code of ethics in the Hollywood Fire Rescue department.

To develop a code of ethics correctly will take some time. It is recommended that the entire organization buy-in to the project through the leader sharing his vision with the troops. A committee made up of a cross section of the department should address the issue. Begin with what the organization already has that indicate a strong value statement. From these, a code of ethics can be developed. All management as well as all labor must be fully committed and supportive of the development process. Provide

ample amounts of training sessions to fully discuss, explain, and answer all questions on the ethical policy. An outside instructor or facilitator may be considered. Train, adjust, re-evaluate prior to the actual implementation. This may be a significant organizational cultural adjustment. The implementation must be phased in gradually at a pace that the organization can withstand.

An organization is made up of individuals. If all the individual members of the organization are committed to the project and follow and practice these guidelines, future decisions will be based on a sound ethical standard. The public's trust in at least the fire service will be preserved and more likely, enhanced. Keep up the training.

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APPENDIX A

COVER LETTER OF SURVEY REQUESTING COOPERATION

January 5, 1998

Dear Fire Chief:

I am a student at the National Fire Academy in the Executive Fire Officer program. I am doing a research project on Ethics in the fire service. I am requesting your assistance in completing the survey. For your convenience, I have provided my fax number for easy return, or you may call the survey answers in to my direct number, also provided. Please return the results to me by January 9, 1998. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Moran, Deputy Fire Chief
Hollywood Fire Rescue

NOTE: Upon request, I will supply a copy of completed report & survey.

APPENDIX B

FIRE SERVICE CODE OF ETHICS SURVEY
Executive Leadership
January, 1998

Name of Department_____

Name of Responder (Optional)_____

1.   Does your organization have a written stand alone code of ethics?

      YES   NO

2.   If NO, Does your organization plan to develop a code of ethics within the next year?

      YES   NO   N/A

3.   If your department has a written code of ethics, did your employees participate in the development?

      YES   NO   N/A

4.   If your organization does not have a written code of ethics, do you feel that your organization's members share a common understanding of your ethical climate?

      YES   NO   N/A

5.   Does your department conduct specific training on ethics?

      YES   NO

6.   Do you feel that your company officers use the written code of ethics when making decisions with ethical implications?

      YES   NO   N/A

APPENDIX C
FIRE SERVICE CODE OF ETHICS SURVEY
Executive Leadership
January, 1998
RESPONSES BY QUANTITY - TOTAL RESPONSES n=27

Name of Department_____

Name of Responder (Optional)_____

1.   Does your organization have a written stand alone code of ethics?

       YES   7   NO 20

2.   If NO, Does your organization plan to develop a code of ethics within
     the next year?

       YES   5   NO 15   N/A 7

3.   If your department has a written code of ethics, did your employees
     participate in the development?

       YES   5   NO 2   N/A 20

4.   If your organization does not have a written code of ethics, do you feel
     that your organization's members share a common understanding of
     your ethical climate?

       YES 8   NO 12   N/A 7

5.   Does your department conduct specific training on ethics?

       YES 16   NO 11

6.   Do you feel that your company officers use the written code of ethics
     when making decisions with ethical implications?

       YES 7   NO 0   N/A 20

APPENDIX D
FIRE SERVICE CODE OF ETHICS SURVEY
Executive Leadership
January, 1998

RESPONSES BY PERCENTAGE - TOTAL RESPONSES n=27

Name of Department_____
Name of Responder (Optional)_____

1.   Does your organization have a written stand alone code of ethics?

            YES   26%   NO 74%

2.   If NO, Does your organization plan to develop a code of ethics within
        the next year?

            YES   25%   NO 75%   N/A 7

3.   If your department has a written code of ethics, did your employees
        participate in the development?

            YES   71.5% NO 28.5%   N/A 20

4.   If your organization does not have a written code of ethics, do you feel
        that your organization's members share a common understanding of
        your ethical climate?

            YES 40%   NO 60%   N/A 7

5.   Does your department conduct specific training on ethics?

            YES 59.25% NO 40.75%

6.   Do you feel that your company officers use the written code of ethics
        when making decisions with ethical implications?

            YES 100%   NO 0%   N/A 20